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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER ARTHUR'S POPULARITY RISES

11. SUMMARY: In a public opinion poll published over the weekend, Prime Minister Owen Arthur and his Barbados Labour Party (BLP) came out as clear winners. The poll demonstrates that the opposition Democratic Labour Party (DLP) and its leader, David Thompson, face an uphill battle in their effort to unseat the BLP in the next parliamentary election, which is expected in late 2007. Prime Minister Arthur's surging popularity, however, does not mean that there are no problems on the horizon. Paradoxically, the poll showed widespread dissatisfaction with the government's performance on key issues, including cost of living, employment, transportation, and housing. The government will therefore have to act quickly to address these issues and demonstrate that 12 years in power have not sapped its energy and motivation. End Summary.

Good News for the BLP

12. On September 24, the Nation daily's "Sunday Sun," published the results of its annual public opinion poll, which was conducted the previous weekend in the 30 constituencies of Barbados. The poll results were mostly good news for Prime Minister Arthur and the BLP. The one thousand poll respondents clearly preferred Prime Minister Arthur over other potential candidates for the premiership. The Prime Minister saw his popularity surge to 49 percent, from last year's 33 percent. He was followed by the opposition's Thompson with 29 percent, Deputy Prime Minister Mia Mottley with 15 percent, and the Junior Finance Minister Clyde Mascoll with 4 percent. If the elections were held today, the BLP would win with 36 percent of the vote, trailed by the DLP with 22 percent. However, with 42 percent of those polled claiming to be "uncertain," there is significant room for change in Barbados' political landscape.

But Some Hope for DLP

13. The poll showed that despite Prime Minister Arthur's popularity, his government's performance is viewed less positively when it comes to specific issues. The poll's respondents, including those claiming to be BLP supporters, gave the government mediocre marks for its handling of issues such as cost of living, employment, transportation, and housing. In his recent public statements, Thompson has sought to exploit this dissatisfaction by focusing on the government's uninspiring performance. However, to translate this potential opportunity into concrete votes, Thompson will have to convince voters that he and his DLP team would be better prepared to handle these challenges.

14. Another potentially good news for the DLP is the split among those polled on the need for change in the government. While 36 percent expressed satisfaction with the BLP-led government, 38 percent thought that it was time for change. Slightly over 26 percent of the poll's respondents were undecided. The Barbadians' weariness with Prime Minister Arthur's government, which has been in power for 12 years, may present an opening for Thompson and the DLP. In recent weeks, Thompson has repeatedly attacked the government for becoming entrenched and unresponsive to the people's needs.

Trouble for the Next Generation of Leaders?

15. Mia Mottley and Clyde Mascoll both saw their popularity drop since last year's poll. Mottley's support fell to 15 percent from last year's 22 percent, and Mascoll saw his popularity slide from 10 percent in 2005 to 4 percent this year. Given that David Thompson also failed to improve his popularity standing, the poll seems to indicate that Barbadians are not especially enthusiastic about the next generation of political leaders. While the reasons for this lackluster performance on the part of the three vary, Mottley's drop in popularity is especially surprising because she was generally perceived as one of the BLP's--and the country's--rising stars.

COMMENT

16. The "Sunday Sun" poll provides a good baseline as Barbados' two major parties begin to make their case to the voters in the run-up to the 2007 election. Prime Minister Arthur's strong showing should further bolster his standing

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within his own party and with the public. While the poll was undoubtedly a disappointment for the DLP and its leader David Thompson, there is some chance that they could still translate the public's dissatisfaction with the issues into votes. So far, the DLP has provided few details on the policy alternatives it is offering. Several observers of local politics have already commented on the lack of fundamental ideological and policy differences between the BLP and the DLP. Consequently, filling the DLP's policy void may prove difficult, if not impossible. The result could therefore be more aggressive attacks on the government's record, and less debate over solutions to the country's problems.

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